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The Matador: Allegory Through Visual Design

by Matt Sauter

(English 1135)

Approximately fifteen minutes into the film *The Matador*, an assassin (Pierce Brosnan) celebrates his birthday. Wearing a sombrero and looking depressed, a single frame (at 00:14:56) provides us with ample information for a *mise-en-scene* analysis.

As a designer, I find myself fascinated by the clever use of a grid system. Accompanying this paper is a reference shot in which I've broken our frame apart into 4 areas, similar to a mathematical graph. Beginning in the upper left (designated Q1), we move in a clockwise direction, naming each quadrant separately (Q2, Q3, Q4). This is easily done by following the elements within the shot itself. Aligned fairly centrally is a pillar, having a right side that aligns perfectly with a set of drawers in the extreme foreground. This creates our vertical axis, while the horizontal is generated on a slight diagonal by the variation in floor height between the main room and the sleeping area. Through clever camera angles, the director has begun to construct our very interpretation of the scene. The clear division of planes also adds depth to the shot. The foreground is fairly close to the camera, even to the extent of obscuring detail and content of the section. The background, wherein our character resides, is clearly defined by the same line as we've used to create our quadrants. Interestingly, this small step up to the bedroom area works in combination with Q1 and Q2 to create the effect of a storefront window. We are observing the Brosnan character, and are not allowed the opportunity to directly interact with him. Our 2x2 grid is revealed as more of a 2x2x2 cube. By creating the scene in this manner, the director is able to keep elements entirely separated; in fact, unaware of each other if need be.

The visual flow relies heavily upon this brilliant division of space. My initial focus is drawn to the upper left quadrant of the screen, or Q1. A man wearing a large sombrero is usually enough to catch my attention, and this time is no different. It's interesting to note that this sombrero creates a diagonal plane, running contrary to the otherwise squared and rectangular elements that have so far composed our frame. The sombrero itself is round unlike almost any other object in the entire shot, and it points directly towards our origin, or the intersection of our quadrants' axis. The Brosnan character, himself occupies the most open of the quadrants. Perhaps a technique to emphasize his solitude and loneliness, we certainly see a man with nowhere to turn. Between the "storefront window" and the central pillar, Brosnan appears to be trapped. There is no visible means to pass from Q1 into Q2—no door, no opening in the wall, nothing. We begin to see less a man in a store window, and more an animal in a cage. With his legs spread and head down the character appears almost like a bull, preparing to charge. This is echoed by the emphasis of yellow throughout the entire first and second quadrants. A contemporary feel, this accent color is nonetheless reminiscent of the sands on which the bull spends its life as well as the cape with which the matador will later drive forth the beast from its prison.

Continuing through the frame, my eye falls next to the second quadrant, in the upper right. Horizontal bars not only echo the powers which Brosnan must face (and in this moment *literally* faces), they remind us of a cage. This area contains more color than perhaps the rest of the shot combined. It seems as if when caged, the animal we know as an assassin is totally surrounded by that which torments him. The sands of the arena, the hue of the matador's cape, even the golden hilt of the athlete's sword. Other than this, the area is fairly empty, fairly alone.

The third quadrant is hardly noticed, as it contains no objects whatsoever. This negative

space is nonetheless critically important. Aside from offsetting the first quadrant in terms of tone and light, this section reinforces the loneliness of Brosnan's cage. The only audience he receives is the arena crowd. They waste no time on a caged bull, but excite at the spectacle of the matador. We begin, in this third quadrant, to understand that the assassin is just an asset. The Brosnan character is obviously being used, but apparently not being cared for. Only when accompanied by excitement and an impending death does the bull have any value.

The deep focus, and low-key lighting draw focus from the third quadrant and towards the fourth. This is not so much because of any particular visual interest in Q4, rather because it is an act of completing a circular pattern, with the eye being drawn again towards the first quadrant, wherein the only human element exists. This use of lighting is key, because along with supplementing our visual flow, it allows for a brief moment of wonderment while in the fourth quadrant. Particular and intentional shadows are created, simultaneously obscuring objects and forcing us to guess at what they may be. For example, there are three cube forms in the extreme foreground of Q4, with circles cut out of their tops. Perhaps they're some sort of candles, perhaps something completely different. We are reminded of an overlying sense of slightly raised angles and closed forms. The high angle allows shadows to be enhanced while granting the impression of the camera as an outside observer, again watching some sort of animal. The presence of an intentionally placed table seems to sit the viewer down, and presents Brosnan as a spectacle. We are casually sitting in the dark while gazing upon a lit stage. The audience is being brought into the frame itself, forced into a further sort of voyeuristic watchfulness. Use of a slow stock film provides clarity of picture; a reminder that we have clarity of mind. We know full well that we're watching a trapped animal, and there exists no sense of shame for such an act.

Upon completion of the eye's circular motion we notice some unidentifiable objects scattered on the ground just before the step up into the sleeping area. My first impression is that of a school child. It's as if we went on a trip to the zoo and someone forgot his backpack in front of an animal's cage. Carelessly strewn on the floor, we can't help but feel that Brosnan, our bull, is at a loss. Initially I felt unsure about what this could be, but the density of the scene presented itself as soon as I allowed myself to stop and take a look. The bull knows its days are numbered, and knows it's being used. Beyond that, it seems not to have a care. Living in the immediate moment, there is no thought to what may come. Only knowledge of what has already been: life in a cage, and life at the expense of other lives.

Work Cited

The Matador. Dir. Richard Shepard. Perf. Pierce Brosnan, Greg Kinnear, Hope Davis. DVD. Miramax, 2005.

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